

Political Indoctrination of Soldiers in the IDF, 1948–1949



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ABSTRACT: This article explores themes in the political education and indoctrination of soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) during the 1948 War. It argues that the army command attempted to advance the notion that a form of militarism rooted in Judaism was the only way to win the war. Education officers explained to soldiers that ‘the Jewish tradition’ sanctioned the eradication of the invading armies and indifference to the fate of Palestinians. The article also traces the influence of Abba Kovner’s lurid propaganda on the rest of the IDF’s education apparatus. Kovner, the education officer of the Givati Brigade, believed that hate propaganda made killing the enemy easier, and his views were shared by many other education officers who saw his work as a road-map for the entire military. Nevertheless, there were some officers who opposed his work out of fear for the consequences that it would have on the future of Israeli society.

KEYWORDS: Abba Kovner, Education Department, *hasbara*, IDF, militarism, 1948 War, Palestinian refugees, propaganda

It is a common misconception that Israel in 1948 was a ‘fledgling state’, with primitive state structures and a partisan-like armed forces. In fact, the members of Israel’s armed forces during that time were anything but partisans. The army’s authorities may have faced challenges equipping their soldiers with sufficient arms and adequate training (Morris 2008), but when it came to the soldiers’ indoctrination—or socio-political training, as it is often termed by scholars—some of the best minds came together to create a ‘melting pot’ designed to produce good Zionist soldiers.

During the course of the 1948 War, from May 1948 to July 1949, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) appointed 746 education officers and sergeants



to oversee the indoctrination and education of some 80,000 immigrant soldiers and a much smaller group of about 20,000 'Sabra Jews', that is, native-born Israelis (Drori 2000: 139; Sivan 1991: 76, 233). Their task was to convince soldiers of what was axiomatic to the army commanders and the Zionist leadership: that a militaristic approach—the use of organized violence—was the most efficacious way to solve the challenges facing Zionism and the Jewish people.¹ In their view, adoption of this belief was essential in order to win the war and to ensure that as few Arabs as possible remained in the new Israeli territory.

In the absence of a clear founding myth among the immigrant recruits, these education officers resorted to the only thing that united all of the soldiers—their Jewishness. When educating soldiers in 1948, state and army officials attempted to show that there was no contradiction between what they saw as 'the Jewish tradition' and the use of force. They also contended that this tradition allowed for crude hatred of the enemy.

Surprisingly, the topic of socio-political training in the IDF has received only limited scholarly attention. While there is a collective biography of the Sabra (Almog 2000), a study of the Zionist 'invented traditions' (Zerubavel 1995), and an analysis of the perception of Arabs in the Zionist education system (Podeh 2002), the role that the armed forces served in shaping Zionism has thus far been the focal point of analysis only in the research of Anita Shapira (1992), Baruch Kimmerling (2001), and Uri Ben-Eliezer (1998). However, these scholars focused on the institutions themselves and did not systematically analyze the ideological training of the individual soldier.

It was David Ben-Gurion himself who designated the IDF as the foremost Zionist institution in charge of educating the masses of new immigrants arriving in Israel. It was his intention that, in the IDF melting pot, the "human mixture which is flowing from many exiles, be smelted, refined, and purified of its foreign and worthless dross" (Tsameret 2002: 50). Although Ben-Gurion did not take steps to formalize this vision through executive orders until after the completion of the 1948 War, it is evident that many of his ideas were implemented in the midst of battles. As I argue in this article, it is precisely this ideological training of the individual soldier during the war that put forward the novel idea of militarism rooted in Judaism that would allow the State of Israel to emerge victorious from the war and Judaize the landscape of Palestine.

To substantiate this argument, I examine army-produced education materials and memos discussing the most effective way to carry out ideological training in the IDF.² Although dozens of topics were covered in soldiers' education materials during the 1948 War, this article focuses on several major themes that are directly linked to militarism: the Bible as a

lens for viewing war, morality in warfare, diplomacy and the use of force, and the question of the Palestinian refugees.

On Muscle Jews, Zionism, and the Use of Force

Before delving into the socio-political training inside the IDF, there is a broader debate that seems appropriate to address briefly at the outset, that is, the question of the relation between Judaism and the use of force. Two conflicting schools of thought dominated this discourse among Zionists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, both of which drew on Jewish sources to assert their legitimacy. One view openly rejected the use of force as a means of advancing Zionist goals, emphasizing instead the moral aspects of Judaism and what its adherents regarded as Judaism's non-violent nature. This school of thought is primarily associated with Asher Ginsberg, most commonly known by his pen name Ahad Ha'am (One of the People). Ahad Ha'am believed that what made the Jewish people distinct was their spiritual power, which he traced back to the biblical prophets. To him, the Jews had a redemptive role to play, not just for their own sake but for the sake of humanity as a whole. Therefore, the reasoning went, Zion must be *or la-goyim* (i.e., "a light unto nations," Isaiah 42:6) and serve as a spiritual center for the entire human race. Hence, it was only natural that Zionists reject the Gentile way of war. This utopian view was adopted by some Zionist thinkers, including Martin Buber and Judah Magnes, but their influence in the Yishuv was marginal (Eisen 2011; Luz 2003; Shapira 1992).

On the other side of the late-nineteenth-century Zionist spectrum was a militaristic view, which advocated building a sovereign Jewish armed force and using that force whenever necessary. Although one can trace this Zionist aspiration to be *ke-khol ha-goyim* (i.e., "a nation like all other nations") to the movement's founder Theodor Herzl himself, in fact the first Jewish thinkers to associate 'normalcy' with the use of force were Micha Berdichevsky and (later) Shaul Tchernichovsky. Both attempted, in their poetry, to 'rediscover' legends from the Jewish past that emphasized heroism, sacrifice, and militarism at the expense of 'Jewish wisdom'. Berdichevsky's writings vilified rabbinic Judaism in particular because, in his view, it "had replaced the Bible's militarism with an ethos that was weak and cowardly and that held Jews hostage for centuries" (Eisen 2011: 173). Although he never immigrated to Palestine, Berdichevsky was one of the strongest advocates of the idea of the 'negation of exile' (*shlilat ha-galut*), which maintained that there was no value to Jewish life in the Diaspora and that the only solution for the Jewish people was immigration to Palestine (ibid.; Luz 2003; Shapira 1992).

To regenerate the Jewish people, these and other early Zionist thinkers turned to nineteenth-century Victorian England and post-Revolutionary France, but also to ideas emanating from social Darwinism across Europe. Max Nordau, a Hungarian Zionist, wanted to create a new role model for the 'Zionist man' that would arrest what he termed the racial decline of the Jews (Mosse 1993). Nordau's views were popular in Palestine, notably with Yosef Hayim Brenner and Ze'ev Jabotinsky (Luz 2003; Mosse 1993; Shapira 1992).

Nevertheless, for the majority of Zionist leaders from the Second Aliyah, neither the pacifist nor the militaristic approach seemed to take into account the reality on the ground. Anita Shapira (1992) argues that well into the 1930s, prominent Zionist leaders on the center and left, such as Chaim Weizmann, Berl Katznelson, and even Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Tabenkin, adopted a middle ground on the question of the use of force. Shapira terms this middle ground 'the defensive ethos' and argues that its adherents saw the use of force as justified only in response to attacks, and that the amount of force used should be limited to fending off such attacks (ibid.). The defensive ethos was justified as both practical (because the Yishuv was still small and weak) and moral. In fact, the Jews in Palestine were encouraged to invest their time in settlement and agriculture and not in military training.

The mobilization of the Yishuv youth to join the British army in fighting the Ottomans at the end of World War I was seen as a major shift from the defensive ethos toward militarism. However, even at that point the defensive ethos did not fade away completely, and the majority of the Yishuv leadership was in favor of dissolving Palestine's Jewish battalions after the war. It was only the Revisionists under Jabotinsky who held on to the militaristic worldview and openly expressed a "longing to shoot." Jabotinsky argued that there could be no agreement between Jews and Arabs in Palestine until the Arabs realized that they could not get rid of the Jews. He opposed making any concessions to the Arabs by limiting Jewish immigration and instead advocated maintaining a strong Jewish armed force in Palestine that would serve as an 'iron wall' against the Arabs (Luz 2003; Shapira 1992). Although Jabotinsky's ideas were formally rejected by the Yishuv's leadership, they began to gain popularity among the younger generations (Ben-Eliezer 1998).

Most scholars agree that the first major political force in the Yishuv to adopt the militaristic worldview and the aspiration to be *ke-khol ha-goyim* was the first Sabra generation. During the 1936 Arab revolt, these young men and women started publicly criticizing the Yishuv leadership's official policy of *havlagah* (restraint), whereby Arab civilians were not targeted after Jews were killed. Words quickly turned into action. Orde Wingate,

an unconventional British officer, recruited the Yishuv's youth for British-style counter-insurgency units known as the Special Night Squads. These units staged raids on Palestinian villages that participated in attacks on Jews, but also on villages that did not. Palestinian Arab militants were often killed, but so were civilians, including women and children. When Wingate was transferred from Palestine and his Special Night Squads were disbanded, his work was continued by Zionist military leaders such as Yizhak Sadeh and Yigal Allon. Marking this shift from the farmer and worker to the fighter was Nathan Alterman's 1938 poem "Zemer ha-Plugot" (Song of the Platoons), which specified that the "boys" replaced the plow with the rifle (Ben-Eliezer 1998; Shapira 1992).

The rivalry between the defensive ethos and militarism remained unresolved throughout much of the 1940s. Shapira (1992) argues that the debate was not resolved even after Israel was established and that it would be unjustified to assert that the Zionist movement (and Israel after 1948) resorted to militarism. In her final assessment, she states that "there were components in that youth's makeup in contradiction with age-old Jewish traditions of love for man, mercy, and compassion" (ibid.: 352). I find Ben-Eliezer's (1998) argument more convincing. He shows that the Sabra generation managed gradually to influence Ben-Gurion to adopt the militaristic view.

By the 1936 Arab revolt, Ben-Gurion had already come to the conclusion that force would be necessary to achieve Jewish hegemony in Palestine. Later he became convinced that armed conflict with the Arabs would ensue after the end of World War II. But although Ben-Gurion was persuaded that a more activist approach was needed to establish a Jewish state, it was the fear that the Sabra generation would seize power that finally made him turn fully to militarism. Still, the shift in his views was a gradual one, and it was not uncontested. Chaim Weizmann and Moshe Sharett, who still clung strongly to the defensive ethos, periodically tried to steer Ben-Gurion in other directions. Nevertheless, by 1948 Ben-Gurion and the Sabra generation had assumed control of the armed forces, and the militaristic view prevailed (Ben-Eliezer 1998).

Institutionalization of Political Indoctrination in the Haganah and IDF

From its founding in 1920 during the British rule in Palestine as a paramilitary organization, the Haganah was engaged in socio-political training, commonly called *hasbara*. But a specialized Hasbara Department was not established until the outbreak of World War II. The main endeavor of the

new branch was the publication of the journal *Ma'arakhot* (Campaigns), which first appeared in 1939 and would later become the IDF's journal for military thought. In 1947, the Haganah weekly *Bamahane* (In the Camp) was put under the supervision of the Hasbara Department. The department also disseminated information about Palestine's Arab³ population (Drori 2000; Ostfeld 1994). The Palmach, the Haganah's elite underground army, had its own *hasbara* apparatus: aimed at propagating its unique *esprit de corps*, it borrowed heavily from the propaganda of the Red Army. In fact, Palmach education officers were often referred to by the Soviet term *politruk* (political commissar).⁴

Following the endorsement of the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine in November 1947 and the outbreak of fighting between Jews and Arabs in the following weeks, the Yishuv leadership announced the mandatory conscription of all Jews in December 1947. With universal conscription for Jews, the Haganah General Staff aimed to develop a coordinated, non-partisan apparatus that would disseminate education materials and address the soldiers' cultural needs. In March 1948, a restructured Hasbara Department (*makhleket ha-hasbara*) was put under the command of Yosef Karkoubi (later, Kariv), an intelligence officer who was familiar with *hasbara* through his work in the Haganah's underground radio stations. In early April 1948, the name of the unit changed to Education Department (*makhleket tarbut*), known by its Hebrew initials as Makhtar.⁵

The two most important staff officers in the department were Chief Hasbara Officer Dov Berger (later, Harari) and Chief Welfare Officer A. Ben-David. Less than a year after the IDF was officially incorporated in late May 1948, 746 education officers and sergeants were appointed to the division, battalion, and platoon levels throughout the armed forces (Drori 2000). A survey of 18 of the rank-and-file officers in the department, based on biographical information that I was able to locate, reveals that they were all of Ashkenazi origin, the majority of them having been born either in Russia or in Poland. Education officers were older than the general soldier population, with an average age of 40. About half of the surveyed officers were from moshavim or kibbutzim, and the other half were associated with the Labor movement in Palestine, either through membership in parties or by holding positions in the General Organization of Workers, the Histadrut. Many had served in the Haganah or the Yishuv intelligence agencies before 1948.⁶ Therefore, it is likely that they were considered politically reliable by the Zionist leadership and by Ben-Gurion himself.

One of the most important tasks of the Education Department was producing pamphlets with lesson plans that could be used to indoctrinate soldiers. The pamphlets were sent to education officers and sergeants, to commanders at the company level and above, and to other staff officers.

Education materials were also produced at the brigade level (Drori 2000). The education pamphlets were almost never signed by their authors, and, with the exception of pamphlets produced in specific units, there is no record of which pamphlets went to which units.

We know very little about the nature of the actual interactions between education officers and soldiers during sessions referred to as “*hasbara* talks.” However, we do know some of the general contours of these events. Chief Hasbara Officer Berger authored guidelines for education officers in August 1948. In them, he advised that a talk should not last more than 45 minutes and should be followed by a 15-to-30-minute discussion. The officer was to give the talk after his men had rested and eaten so that they would pay attention. Berger emphasized the need for eye contact and required that officers “converse” with the soldiers rather than read to them. An officer must relate everything he says—even the most abstract point—to the soldiers sitting in front of him. “Convince them that everything you explain concerns them and obligates them,” Berger concluded.⁷ Education officers reported that capturing soldiers’ attention was hard but not impossible. One noted that he saw his work as “social cement that brings the servicemen together and creates bonds among them.”⁸

Political Indoctrination during the 1948 War

The Bible was used by all major political factions in the Yishuv for propaganda already in the late 1930s (Gertz 2000), but it was only during the 1948 War that it gained prominence in Zionist education materials, at the expense of other, later Jewish writings. Together with myths of bravery and sacrifice, the Bible was used to instill the view that ‘activism’—a euphemism for military action—was the only course of action for the Jewish people.⁹ Numerous IDF education pamphlets in 1948–1949 stressed the bravery of the Jews from biblical times to the present and their mastery of the sword.¹⁰ However, soldiers were also told that Jewish history had come to a standstill in the Diaspora and that only modern Zionist soldiers, like the ones who fought in the Jewish Legion in World War I, represented the return of the Jews to history and “the eradication of the Diaspora and its complete negation [*shlilat ha-galut*].”¹¹

Implying that the Arabs were an ancient nemesis of the Jewish people was a popular theme in the materials distributed in 1948. One of the most intriguing and cryptic publications of the Education Department during the war was a pamphlet titled “Morality in Israel’s Army.”¹² Morality, the education officers wrote, “is different in every period and every place ... Jewish morality is not the same as Christian morality, and the morality of

peacetime is unlike that of wartime."¹³ The education officers wanted to make sure that, in wartime, soldiers understood that killing was a necessity: "In peacetime we say, 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed' [Genesis 9:6] and in a time of war 'the more [killing] the merrier [*kol hamarbeh harei zeh meshubakh*].' And it is said: 'Thine eye shall not pity him' [Deuteronomy 19:13]."¹⁴ The implication was clear: the soldier should not pity the enemy, but kill him without mercy. But who was the enemy? Here the education officers entered into an elaborate discussion of the different kinds of warfare in biblical times.

The first kind of war presented in the pamphlet was one of complete extermination (*milkhemet kherem*) against the ancient archenemy of the Israelites, Amalek. This people, the pamphlet narrated, attacked the Israelites from behind with no apparent reason: "That is why Israelite morality commands us to revenge. In an oath of revenge [*shvu'at nakam*] the Torah commands us 'the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation' [Exodus 17:16]." The pamphlet continues, "He demands a revenge of extermination without mercy to whoever tries to hurt us for no reason."¹⁵ The education officers then explained that in biblical times Saul exterminated all Amalekites—men and women, youth and elderly, and even sheep and cattle. Their possessions were burned because in a war of extermination, it was unlawful to enjoy the fruits of conquest.¹⁶

The other type of war mentioned in the pamphlet was a war of conquest (*milkhemet kibbush*), which the authors also called a war of commandment or mandatory war (*milkhemet mitzvah*).¹⁷ This war could only take place within the boundaries of the Land of Israel. The education officers stressed that this too was a war of annihilation: Joshua, in the Bible, was commanded to annihilate the nations of the land and forbidden to make any treaties with them.¹⁸ The pamphlet quotes Deuteronomy 7:1 alluding to the Seven Nations of Canaan, which the Bible instructs the Israelites to annihilate permanently. The pamphlet ends¹⁹ by specifying: "In this case [war of occupation] the army is allowed to take spoils including women and children to be slaves and concubines. It is a must to kill the male captives in this sort of war."²⁰

An article from the Education Department's weekly *Bamahane* in June 1948 supplemented the publication of "Morality in Israel's Army." It repeated much of the contents of the pamphlet but also stressed that "a war of commandment is a war in which Israel is ordered by the Torah to fight the 'Seven Nations' of Canaan and Amalek, and also *war against an enemy who plots against the nation and the country* [emphasis in the original]."²¹ The last part, written in a different font, seems to be an attempt to draw parallels between biblical times and 1948. The article also stressed that in a war of commandment, the leader must first make a peace offer

to the enemy, stipulating taxes and complete subjection to the conquering force. If the enemy refuses, then it is permissible to go on the offensive.

The pamphlet and *Bamahane* article were the work of experts who had intimate knowledge of the biblical text and its exegesis in later periods (Talmud, Midrash, and medieval).²² Their writings suggest, however, that they were attempting to use these stories for a distinctly modern purpose. The decision to include these biblical stories and interpretations in education materials is especially remarkable because Jewish religious law (Halakhah) had tended to suppress them for centuries (Carmy 2007; Lamm 2007; Luz 2003; Schiffman and Wolowelsky 2007a). In fact, except for a few cursory mentions of Amalek (mostly in relation to Nazi Germany),²³ the only modern cultural setting in which the Seven Nations of Canaan and the Amalekites were systematically discussed in the 1930s and 1940s was in the writings of Revisionists. The poet Uri Tzvi Greenberg viewed the annihilation of the Amalekites as a roadmap for the Zionist struggle against the Arabs. He argued against those in the Yishuv who said that Jewish morality prohibited vengeance and cruelty against the enemy (Luz 2003).

Some education officers took the concept of a war of annihilation quite literally. The most famous of them was Abba Kovner, who served as the education officer of the Givati Brigade during the 1948 War.²⁴ Kovner was an influential figure in the Yishuv. A member of the left-Zionist Hashomer Hatza'ir youth movement and a poet, he had been one of the leaders of the Jewish underground in the Vilna Ghetto during the Holocaust and later a partisan. After the end of World War II, he immigrated to Palestine and held various public positions. In May 1948, he was appointed as the Givati Brigade's education officer (Barzel 1998).

Kovner's near-death experiences under Nazi occupation and later as a partisan fighting alongside the Red Army had a great impact on him. Kovner believed that the 1948 War could be the ultimate victory of the Jews after their failure to save themselves during the Holocaust. To him, the logic that drove the Arabs was the same as that which had driven Hitler (Barzel 1998). These ideas appeared in the education pamphlets he authored, which were known as 'combat bulletins'. Regularly distributed to and read by soldiers, these bulletins were immensely popular (Avnery 2008). Kovner published 31 combat bulletins in the 1948–1949 period, with each printing consisting of about 7,000 copies. The impact of the bulletins far exceeded their number, and they were in high demand all over the IDF (Barzel 1998; Porat 2010: 244–245, 247).

The first bulletin Kovner published is well-known in Israel to this day because of the controversy it stirred. In it, Kovner harshly attacked the decision of members of Kibbutz Nitzanim and the Givati soldiers stationed there to surrender to the Egyptian army on 7 June 1948 (see OCGB

1962).²⁵ Kovner argued that it was better to die than to surrender (Barzel 1998; Porat 2010). A month later, the situation on the ground had changed, and the IDF became more successful on the battlefield. Worried about the possible complacency of the soldiers, Kovner exhorted them in his 12 July 1948 bulletin: “Yes, we have broken their spirit. We also cracked their bodies. But they still have strength ... And even if we are certain that the manure of the invaders’ corpses will make our fields bloom, for now—we are called to be ready, to have valor, and to be prepared to sacrifice ourselves” (OCGB 1962: Combat Bulletin No. 5). Two days later, Kovner used even more explicit language, exalting revenge:

The Anglo-Faroukian²⁶ dogs are under our wheels! ... This night will be the night of the Plague of Blood. Samson’s Foxes (the brigade’s mechanized commando unit) pushed forward! And suddenly—the land was soft—corpses! Dozens of corpses under their wheels. The driver flinched: human beings are under his wheels! Wait. Remember Negba²⁷ and Bayt Daras²⁸—and run them over!²⁹ Don’t flinch sons, these are murder dogs—their sentence is blood! ... Buckle down, boys, as our jeeps will turn into amphibious vehicles and we will march in the stream. The stream of the invaders’ blood ... Run them over! (ibid.: Combat Bulletin No. 6)

By invoking the biblical story of the Plague of Blood (*makat dam*) from the Ten Plagues in the Book of Exodus, Kovner equated modern-day with ancient Egypt and presented Givati soldiers as victims of Egyptian oppression, as in the Bible. He hoped that conflating the two would render the mass killing of Egyptian soldiers morally acceptable. For the few Israeli soldiers who might have thought his injunction to be allegorical, Kovner adopted a more explicit tone in his bulletin of 17 July 1948: “Around you, the eyes of the Nile dogs glimmer. Into the Nile, you dogs! Into the Nile! In curse, in prayer, and in love—pull the trigger, slaughter, slaughter, slaughter” (ibid.: Combat Bulletin No. 9).

For Kovner, revenge could engender a love of freedom: “As you improve in killing the murderous dogs, so would you improve in your love for what is beautiful, what is good, and for freedom” (OCGB 1962: Combat Bulletin No. 6). This idea in Kovner’s writing could be directly tied to Soviet propaganda during World War II—propaganda he knew very well from his time as a partisan.³⁰ Ilya Ehrenburg, the foremost Soviet wartime propagandist, made the same connection between hatred and love that Kovner would make six years later, saying: “Hatred, as love, is inherent to pure and warm hearts. We hate fascism because we ... love life. The stronger the love of life is within us, the firmer is our hatred” (Reese 2011: 178).

In the decades since the 1948 War, both participants and scholars have argued that no one took Kovner’s writings seriously and that the

combat bulletins were not regarded as instructions on how to deal with the enemy.³¹ However, the severity of the backlash against Kovner's writing at the time belies these claims. In fact, Kovner's gory language in his combat bulletins prompted his peers in the Education Department to address head-on the delicate topic that had hitherto been left unaddressed: hatred of the enemy.³² On 4 August 1948, all brigade-level education officers convened to talk about Givati's combat bulletins and about hate indoctrination more broadly. The discussion was led by Karkoubi, the head of the IDF Education Department, who was supposed to make a final decision on the subject. Few education officers believed that encouraging soldiers to hate the Arab enemy was problematic, but most were bothered by the graphic language in Givati's bulletins.

Quoting the call to make "a sea of blood" of the Egyptian soldiers, a staff officer from the Education Department argued: "We should excite them [the Israeli soldiers] into battle, but we must maintain some limits on expression." Another officer replied that since the Egyptians were foreign invaders, one was allowed to be particularly brutal. Then the education officer of the Carmeli Brigade intervened, offering a more nuanced understanding of the psychology of the soldier: "There are bestial instincts in the human heart. On top of them there is a thin layer of civilization. If we give room to those instincts, we won't be able to stop them. If we say slaughter, we condone rape." The Navy's chief education officer did not agree. He stressed the importance of hatred, especially when "defeatist" voices in the press advocated letting Palestinian refugees return to their villages. "The Givati Brigade combat bulletins border on sadism," objected the Golani Brigade education officer. "We know well what slaughter is, and we cannot be cavalier about it ... A soldier does not slaughter—he kills if and when there's a need." Along similar lines, Chief Hasbara Officer Berger objected to hate indoctrination and warned that a call to step on the corpses of the enemy would not stay within the confines of war but would influence the character of the new state as well.³³

Drawing on some of the ideas presented in "Morality in Israel's Army," the education officer for the public works brigade³⁴ eventually stepped in, saying that the Hebrew Bible contained even crueler depictions of warfare and mass killing, ones that should be followed. "There is no basis for panic," he mocked his fellow officers. "The Bible has harsher expressions than Givati's combat bulletins. The Bible books were edited/redacted [i.e., before canonization], and these expressions were specifically not omitted." The officer then said what others did not dare to say: "The orders pertaining to the murder and extermination of the enemy in the Bible were written with discretion and not during times of emergency. It was written for coming generations. We have to make the enemy hated, using all the

tools at our disposal.” It is unclear whether the officer was also advocating the murder of women and children along the lines of the biblical story mentioned in the “Morality in Israel’s Army” pamphlet.³⁵

It is clear that these views echoed to a large extent those of the extreme right in Israel at the time, especially those of poet Uri Zvi Grinberg (Luz 2003). Nevertheless, the interpretation of the education officer for the public works brigade about what the Hebrew Bible called for was not shared by most of the officers in the room. Karkoubi, the head of the IDF Education Department, was only partially convinced by his junior officers: “There is a danger that we would be overly influenced by the Jewish tradition that rules out crude hatred. We need to adjust our state of mind to the new conditions ... That is why we need to nurture the hate instinct. [But] we need to put limits to hatred. It has to be rational. We must explain to the soldiers why they have to hate the enemy, and they would hate him as long as there is a reason. This is a rational hatred that fits the Jewish nature.”³⁶

Karkoubi was at least partially correct in suggesting that modern European Jewish tradition “rules out crude hatred.” As Derek Penslar (2013) argues, Jewish religious leaders from the nineteenth century onward were hesitant to vilify the enemy with which their state was at war. With Jews dispersed across the European continent, there was fear that Jews from one nation would fight Jews from another, and Jewish religious leaders were not willing to entertain the possibility of Jews killing other Jews. But as there were no Jews fighting for the Arab side, this was not a concern in 1948. Thus, the debate among education officers concluded that hatred of the enemy was permitted, but on a limited scale in keeping with what Karkoubi considered “the Jewish nature.” This, Karkoubi felt, would ensure a balance between the need to create effective fighters and the desire that hatred, in its abstract sense, would not damage the character of the new Israeli society.

The education officers were quick to respond to the new orders in the pages of the weekly *Bamahane*. Soldiers were told that one of the essential elements in any unit’s *esprit de corps* was hatred for the enemy “with eyes wide open ... efficient, but passionate, and unyielding.” The outlet for that hatred was also made clear: “We destine *death to the invaders* and nothing less. Death and defeat and extermination, one from which there is no resurgence [emphasis in the original].”³⁷ However, to keep hatred outside of society, the Education Department also saw a need to target the issue of plunder directly (although sparingly). In an article calling on them not to loot Palestinian property, soldiers were warned: “He who lets himself run wild with Arab property would end up taking Jewish property lightly [too]; he who abuses our neighboring people will mistreat his own people ... Plunder, more than it hurts the victim, corrupts the soul of the offender.”³⁸

Although no other education officer produced the kind of lurid propaganda that Kovner authored, calls for revenge were definitely not seen as something to be discouraged. *Bamahane* was also vague regarding the treatment of Arab prisoners of war (POWs). One article quoted a POW saying that he was told that the Jews would kill every captured Arab. "We thought you would be right to do so," the prisoner reportedly told the reporter.³⁹ A week later, a short column about the rights of POWs appeared in the weekly magazine, but it discussed their treatment only while inside POW camps and not immediately after their capture.⁴⁰

In fact, only the Palmach bulletins explicitly cautioned soldiers against indiscriminate violence (Inbar 2005).⁴¹ Palmach education materials expressed concern that celebrating the use of force would affect the new Israeli society. Soldiers were warned not to be complacent about the spilling of blood because this indifference would trickle down to day-to-day life.⁴² In a letter printed in a Palmach pamphlet, the father of a fallen soldier encouraged his son's comrades to be brutal, but to understand that brutality must cease at war's end: "The fingernails the Hebrew avengers use to rip the bodies of the murderers are artificial, borrowed from the destructive world that spills our blood mercilessly. Our sons will shed the fingernails of blood when the murder and strangulation plot [against us] is removed ... Blessed we are for raising a generation of fighters who drink from the fountain of bravery, but not in order to be intoxicated."⁴³ This observation of the bereaved father echoes that of Karkoubi. Both men were concerned, not because of the violence inflicted on the men and women who were seen as the enemy, but rather due to the implications of such violence on the character of the new nation.

In any case, Palmach education materials were the exception, as most other army units were silent on the matter of soldiers' brutality. Real intervention in the kind of behavior Kovner and others were advocating came only at the end of 1948. In December 1948, on the eve of Operation Horev, the last offensive on the southern front, the IDF launched a campaign against the murder of POWs and civilians. Yigal Allon, who commanded the southern front, warned that any unjustified killing of civilians would be regarded as murder and that the soldiers would be prosecuted. He also cautioned against harassing the civilian population, looting, or expelling Palestinians without a direct order.⁴⁴ Another intervention came from Ben-Gurion himself in March 1949. After the war was essentially over, he ordered the distribution among soldiers of a poem written by Nathan Alterman criticizing the murder of innocent civilians by soldiers. The poem, "Al Zot" (On This), was originally published in Mapai's daily newspaper and described a young soldier "trying out" his machine gun

on Arab civilians. Alterman (cited in Cohen 2008: 140) was concerned by the complacency of Israelis to atrocities:

Let us sing then also about “delicate incidents”
 For which the true name, incidentally, is murder
 And let songs be composed about conversations between sympathetic
 interlocutors
 Who with collusive chuckles make concessions and grant forgiveness

The publication of the poem also included a short introduction by Ben-Gurion, who emphasized: “If this conscience is not at work and palpitates in our hearts during these days, we shall not be worthy of the greatness we have been given thus far.”⁴⁵

It is noteworthy that the same conscience was not invoked when discussing the Palestinian refugees, a pressing topic already in the midst of war. Here, a militaristic view—contempt for diplomacy and solving problems through the use of force—was stressed. The Palestinians as a whole were vilified, and the education materials explained to the soldiers that the Palestinians had intended to massacre the Jews and loot their possessions; therefore, it was crucial ‘to purify’ (*le-taher*) the villages that did not collaborate with the Jews.⁴⁶

To the soldiers saddened by the stream of refugees leaving their villages and marching toward the borders, Menachem Talmi, a Givati soldier and a journalist, explained in the pages of *Bamahane* in July 1948: “We do not do to them what they would have done to us if they were in our place. We do not massacre our one-time murderers, but we will not be caught up showing mercy! We rejoice in the jubilation of an army that won ... They ran wild and promised to throw us into the sea. Their fantasy was our downfall, our spilled blood was pleasing to their eyes. This is their punishment.”⁴⁷ The soldiers were told to remember the Jews killed on the roads at the beginning of the war and to “feel the sweet revenge. Once again you do not feel any compassion or regret.” The IDF conquests, the education officers explained, put an end to the wandering of the Jews. Their walking sticks had been turned into weapons, and now another people became the wandering nation.⁴⁸

Throughout this study, the voices of soldiers responding to propaganda have been difficult to discern. However, some indoctrination materials seem to suggest that soldiers did question the propagation of hatred within the army. For example, in April 1948, shortly after the Palestinian exodus began, the Education Department published a pamphlet entitled “Answers to Questions Soldiers Frequently Ask.” The first question was “Why don’t we agree to return the Arab refugees during the lull [in fighting]?” Concerned lest the presentation of this question contradict indoctrination

efforts, the education officers took the opportunity to stifle any dreams of peace, explaining that the return of refugees during wartime would pose a security risk: "No one understands better than us the pain of these refugees ... but the one guilty of their situation cannot demand that *we* solve his problem. The enemy started the war that brought about a Shoah [holocaust] on hundreds of Arab villages ... and he must face the consequences [emphasis in the original]." ⁴⁹ A *Bamahane* article stressed that "humanitarian or social justifications must not be given more weight than military, political, or demographic ones." ⁵⁰ Only after the end of the war, when the Arab states recognized the permanence of the Jewish state, would there be time to address the refugee question, but never through their return. They would instead have to be resettled in the Arab states. ⁵¹

When discussing the Palestinian exodus, the education officers employed verbal acrobatics. At times, they explained, the villages were "cleared" (*punu*), without specifying who was responsible. At other times, "psychosis and general fear" were given as reasons for leaving, and the Deir Yasin massacre was mentioned as a contributing factor. As a pamphlet explained, it was not the massacre itself that caused the fleeing but the propaganda of the Arab armies, which hoped to use the massacre to excite the Arabs for revenge. But the plan backfired: instead of preparing for battle, the masses began to flee. The education officers quoted a British sergeant who reportedly witnessed the exodus in Jaffa: "The Arabs were scared to death when they imagined to themselves that the Jews would do to them half of what they would have done to the Jews if things were the other way around." ⁵² By June 1949, the education pamphlets articulated the new Israeli policy, clearly stating that "the Arabs of Israel left the country not under Jewish pressure" and more importantly that Israel would refuse to allow their return. ⁵³

Another popular theme in the 1948 education materials was scorn for diplomacy. For the most part, soldiers were told that only the use of force, creating "facts on the ground," could strengthen Israel's position. Diplomatic moves, and especially the Bernadotte Plan, ⁵⁴ were seen as a sign of weakness that should be avoided when possible. ⁵⁵ Taking on Carl von Clausewitz's famous saying that "war is the continuation of politics by other means," the education officers explained (echoing Ben-Gurion) that the reverse was also true: "War could also be the precursor [of diplomacy] and pave its way. The military strength of a small country has a diplomatic role in establishing facts that the military and political leadership then try to get approval for." ⁵⁶

In January 1949, as the negotiations for an armistice started on the island of Rhodes, it was necessary for the Education Department to explain why fighting had to give way to diplomacy. Diplomacy would ensure that Israel's heroic victories would not be squandered. However, the soldiers were

reassured that the Rhodes talks would not be the end of the story because “in the current psychosis of the eve of war, ‘peace’ is but a local and temporary concept.”⁵⁷ The education officers anticipated that the use of force would be reintroduced in a “second round,” because the Arabs would not accept their defeat. It was not that Israel wanted to fight, but “there is no alternative” (*‘eyn brerah*).⁵⁸

Conclusion

The overall picture that emerges from the 1948–1949 education materials is one that attempts to give a ‘Jewish justification’ to a militaristic worldview, in other words, to explain why ‘the Jewish tradition’ condoned the physical eradication of the invading armies and indifference to the fate of Palestinians, be they combatants or civilians. Education officers advanced a view that had a long tradition in Zionist thought—that Jews should become *ke-khol ha-goyim* and adopt the Gentile way of war.

An analysis of the education materials and the minutes from the meetings of education officers clearly shows that the army command saw hate propaganda as beneficial because it made killing the enemy easier. Yehuda Wallach, who was a Givati battalion commander during the war and later became commander of the brigade, commented in 1950 that hatred was one of the most important motivating factors in 1948, something he realized only after he saw the impact that Kovner’s slogan “death to the invaders” had on his soldiers.⁵⁹ “You cannot be a good fighter without hatred,” he explained to the General Staff. “As cruel as it might seem ... it is clear to me that the turning point in fighting in the southern front happened at the same moment when you could feel and show [soldiers] the first dead Egyptian soldier. Until that contact was made, our soldier was not imbued with a will to fight.”⁶⁰

Still, education officers wanted to balance two conflicting ideas: on the one hand, a desire to create the best fighters possible by pushing them to be brutal and remorseless, and, on the other hand, a larger concern about the kind of values they desired for the future Israeli society. By the end of the war, the officers believed that they had managed to strike a balance between the two, but they soon discovered that it came at the expense of self-control, as demonstrated by the murder of POWs during the 1956 Suez War and the Kafr Qasim massacre the same year.

By the middle of the twentieth century, most Western armies recognized that “hatred of the enemy and sadistic gratification from killing frequently led to an escalation in those emotions that actually hampered successful combat” (Bourke 1999: 156). The IDF did not learn this lesson until the

late 1960s, and only in 1970 did it begin stressing the importance of “war without hatred.”⁶¹ This was a full reversal from the IDF’s approach in 1948, and in 1970 the chief education officer, Yitzhak Arad, explicitly explained that the reason for the change was the risk of losing self-control: “Hatred leads to an emotional response, and we are committed to calculated and conscious actions ... A good soldier is one who acts on cognizance and is not led by hatred.”⁶² Thus, from that point onward, Israeli education officers had to make sure that messages of victimization and militarism did not fuel hatred.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Hillel Cohen, Samuel Dolbee, Nitzan Goldberger, Zachary Lockman, Fredrik Meiton, David N. Myers and the UCLA Graduate Student Colloquium, Gabriel Piterberg, Gil-li Vardi, and Ronald Zweig for their feedback and editorial help.

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NOTES

1. I adopt Uri Ben-Eliezer’s (1998: 7) distinction regarding militarism as a cultural phenomenon whereby “organized violence, or war, is the optimal solution for political problems.” This is not to say that every use of military force attests to militarism (*ibid.*).
2. There is no one source for these education materials. In addition to articles in the army’s weekly *Bamahane*, IDF education pamphlets dated 1948–1949 may be found in the IDF Archives (IDFA), Haganah Archives (HA), Palmach Archives (PA), Kibbutz Meuhad Archives (KMA), and the Israel National Library (INL).
3. The term ‘Palestinians’ was never used in official IDF publications until at least the late 1970s.
4. Palmachai, “Our Education Officers,” *Bamahane*, 5 August 1948.
5. A few months after April 1948, the unit changed its name again to Education Service (*shirut tarbut*), but both names were used interchangeably (Drori 2000: 137; Ostfeld 1994: 437).

6. I compiled this biographical information based on untitled minutes from a 1949 meeting of education officers in IDFA 137/1042/1949. Other sources included Tidhar (1968) and Din (1999). Several online databases were consulted as well.
7. Education Department/Hasbara, Dov Berger, Chief Hasbara Officer to Education Officers, "Attn: Carrying Out Hasbara Actions," 14 August 1948, 1–2, in IDFA 10/284/1949.
8. S. Farber, "Culture and Hasbara," in HA 80/774/3.
9. For the Palmach definition of activism, see Palmach Pamphlet No. 37, December 1945, 45, in PA.
10. See, for example, Education Department, Chapter Headings for Hasbara, "Bravery Map," 24 February 1949, and "The Israelite Exodus from Egypt and the Conquering of the Country," 30 March 1949, in INL.
11. Education Service, "Kabbalat Shabbat," 4 March 1949, KMA 15/12/3.
12. Another optional translation is "The Morality in the Israelite Army."
13. "Morality in Israel's Army," 31 May 1948–8 October 1948, in IDFA 259/1003/1950.
14. Ibid.
15. The depiction of Amalek in the pamphlet is in line with the Peshat (literal) commentary of the biblical story (see Carmy 2007).
16. The biblical text indeed mentions this prohibition, as do the Midrash and medieval exegeses (see Sokolow 2007).
17. It is noteworthy that scholars of war in biblical times usually distinguish only between discretionary war (*milkhemet reshut*) and war of commandment (*milkhemet mitzvah*). A war of complete extermination (*milkhemet herem*) is not considered a type of its own and is usually associated with a war of commandment (see Schiffman and Wolowelsky 2007a).
18. The source of this biblical commentary is unclear. A different view is presented in the *Bamahane* article discussed in the following paragraph.
19. It is unclear whether pages are missing from this pamphlet. I could not locate other pages in the IDFA.
20. This also seems in line with Peshat and other biblical exegeses (see Sokolow 2007).
21. Ri-Sh, "The Laws of War in Israel," *Bamahane*, 24 June 1948.
22. The familiarity that the author or authors had with both the biblical text and medieval exegeses is apparent by the fact that the texts echo debates between modern Bible commentators about the meaning of Maimonides' silence when it came to Amalek. Some saw this silence as a concession that Amalek still existed (unlike the Seven Nations of Canaan), and hence a war of commandment could still be sanctioned in modern times. Several scholars have gone so far as to suggest that any enemy of the Jewish people can be considered Amalek (see Carmy 2007).
23. It seems that the term 'Amalek' was sometimes used as a generic name for an enemy by Jewish communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During World War II, the Nazis were referred to as Amalek (see Penslar 2013).

24. This is my reading of Kovner's 'combat bulletins' (*daf kravi*). Kovner's biographer, Dina Porat (2010), argues differently. According to her, Kovner saw "the need for a strong, humane Jewish military force" (ibid.: 239). She maintains that the horror propaganda was not understood literally by most soldiers.
25. Kovner's bulletins were compiled and published in 1962 by the Organizing Committee for the Givati Brigade Veterans Convention (OCGB) as part of the fifteenth anniversary of the formation of the Givati Brigade.
26. The term 'Faroukian' refers to King Farouk, who ruled Egypt at the time. It was also widely believed that the British were assisting the Egyptian army.
27. Egyptian forces constantly attempted to occupy the settlement of Negba, established by Hashomer Hatza'ir in 1939. Dozens of the settlement's residents were killed before IDF forces managed to push the Egyptian army out of the area.
28. Bayt Daras was a Palestinian village 20 miles north of Gaza where fierce fighting between Israeli forces and Egyptian soldiers took place.
29. In Hebrew, the command 'to run over' (*va-yidros*) has a similar sound to the name of the village Bayt Daras.
30. Kovner and many of the brigade's officers from the kibbutz movement were fond of *Panfilov's Men*, a novel by the Soviet writer Alexander Bek about the defense of Moscow during World War II. The book was translated into Hebrew in 1946 and was seen by many as the pivotal example for promoting *esprit de corps*. It was also used by the Palmach. See Palmach Pamphlet No. 12-13, November-December 1943, 30, in PA.
31. Meir Davidson, the deputy brigade commander, argued that combat soldiers did not look on Kovner's bulletins as specific guidelines for dealing with the enemy. Davidson insisted that the Givati Brigade, in fact, called for the humane treatment of Egyptian soldiers. Porat (2010), Kovner's biographer, agrees with these assertions.
32. In addition to debates inside the IDF, Kovner's writings were also extensively discussed within his own movement, Hashomer Hatza'ir. See Porat (2010) and Barzel (1998).
33. Education Department, "Hasbara Methods about the Enemy," 4 August 1948, in IDFA 102/6127/1949.
34. This unit was composed of a militarized workforce, which was deemed essential for the economy and the war effort. Aside from their daily employment, the brigade's men were also trained as soldiers and were deployed at the battlefields. The brigade was responsible for conquering the village al-Tira, next to Haifa (Grinberg 1998).
35. Education Department, "Hasbara Methods about the Enemy."
36. Ibid.
37. D. Ahi-Eliahu, "The *Esprit de Corps*," *Bamahane*, 12 August 1948.
38. Eliezer Libenstein, "The Abomination of Robbery," *Bamahane*, 29 July 1948. Another article with similar themes appeared in the education materials in July 1948. See HA 80/138/6.
39. Mordechai Tabib, "In Enemy Lines Behind Bars," *Bamahane*, 15 July 1948.
40. Shmuel Landa, "Read and Learn: The Rights of POWs," *Bamahane*, 22 July 1948.

41. See also Palmach Pamphlet No. 68, 30 July 1948, 6, in PA.
42. Palmach Pamphlet No. 60, April 1948, 30, in PA.
43. Y. Ben-David letter in Palmach Pamphlet No. 57–58 (January–February 1948), 11, in PA.
44. Headquarters of Front D, “A Special Annex to Operation Order Horev,” December 1948, in IDFA 187/121/1950.
45. “Al Zot” pamphlet in HA 80/P18/4.
46. Yizhak Avrahami, “The Bells of Nazareth Are Ringing Hebrew,” *Bamahane*, 22 July 1948.
47. Menahem Talmi, “In the Areas of the Beaten Enemy,” *Bamahane*, 22 July 1948.
48. “The Last Bisani,” *Bamahane*, 6 October 1949.
49. Education Department, “Straight to the Point: Questions and Answers (Answers to Questions Soldiers Frequently Ask),” 5 April 1948, 1, in IDFA 156/710/1950.
50. Ephraim Talmi, “The Arab Refugees Problem,” *Bamahane*, 12 August 1948.
51. Education Department, “Straight to the Point.”
52. Education Department, Chapter Headings for Hasbara, “Facts and Figures about the Arab Fleeing,” 18 July 1948, in IDFA 7/794/1950; Y. Tzalaf, “Behind the Enemy Lines,” *Bamahane*, 22 July 1948.
53. Education Department, Chapter Headings for Hasbara, “Army Day,” 26 June 1949, in IDFA 156/710/1950.
54. In late 1948, Count Folke Bernadotte, the Swedish diplomat serving as the UN Security Council’s mediator in Palestine, came up with a new plan to replace the UN Partition Plan. His proposal stipulated that Israel would have to yield the Negev to Transjordan, although it would be allowed to keep the Galilee. Bernadotte was soon assassinated by a militant Zionist group, and his plan was dropped.
55. This was also a theme in Palmach education materials. See Palmach Pamphlet No. 74, 3 October 1948, 3–5, in PA.
56. Education Service, Chapter Headings for Hasbara, “A One-Year Anniversary for the State of Israel,” 26 April 1949, in IDFA 364/5254/1949. For a discussion of the reversal of von Clausewitz’s idea, see Ben-Eliezer (1998).
57. Education Department, Chapter Headings for Hasbara, “The Rhodes Talks,” 16 January 1949, 3, in IDFA 364/5254/1949.
58. Education Department, “Army Day.” For the ways in which scorn for diplomacy and calls for action evolved in the IDF during the 1950s, see Vardi (2008).
59. Colonel Yehuda Wallach, “Soldiers’ Education in View of Tactical Needs,” 2 November 1952, 19, in General Staff/Chief Education Officer-Hasbara, *Education and Morale in the IDF (Debates, Lectures and Methodic Material)*, in IDFA 206/385/1963.
60. *Ibid.*, 21.
61. The General Staff/Chief Education Officer/Hasbara and Guidance Branch, Chief Education Officer, Yitzhak Arad, “Attn: Hasbara Guidelines in the IDF,” 6 January 1970, 5, in IDFA 9/268/1971.
62. *Ibid.*

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